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The Improvement and Extension of the Registration Area



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THE IMPROVEMENT AND EXTENSION OF THE REGISTRATION AREA.

It is my purpose to present the point of view of the public, and especially of the private organizations, in this symposium.

Let me define at the outset what I believe is the attitude of these groups toward this problem. Their chief interest in furthering national vital statistics is to conserve life and health. There are evidences of gross waste in infant life, in early life from preventable infection, and in middle life from the degenerative diseases. There is concern that the new generation is perhaps too largely represented by the offspring of the racial stocks less favored economically, physically, and spiritually. The public has become aware of these conditions not so much through statistical inquiries as through direct observation. Its knowledge is still largely a matter of personal impression. It is now desired to learn the extent of this waste accurately, to locate it definitely, to discover its causes, and to apply suitable remedies. The nation wants the facts. A complete system of vital statistics is the only way to get them.

The contribution of the federal government to this demand for adequate statistical material is a registration area for deaths, covering, up to the present time, about two thirds of the population of the country. A registration area for births exists only as a plan, and an area for reporting disease has not even been seriously contemplated.

The time is opportune for the improvement and extension of the registration service. The public, when properly approached, has responded favorably upon several occasions. In the course of the last two years at least five states—Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—after a campaign of education among the people, have adopted the Model Vital Statistics Law approved by the Bureau of the

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Census. A number of other states have accepted amendments bringing their statutes into closer agreement with the provisions of the model bill. It is important to note that the social workers and those especially interested in public health are the moving spirits in this educational work. The registration area has been largely extended through the efforts of those fighting for improved infant hygiene, for the control of tuberculosis, and for better working conditions for men and women in industry. The statisticians have played only a subordinate part in these campaigns.

Private organizations are vitally interested in the campaign for better registration. The railways, the telephone and telegraph companies, the large industrial corporations, the life insurance companies—indeed, all public service agencies whose field of operation covers a large part of the country—are concerned with the conditions of life and health of the population. The extension of their markets is often determined by sanitary and hygienic considerations. In addition they are becoming more and more interested in the welfare of their employees. They desire to know the facts of mortality and morbidity as experienced by the men in their plants. Many have accordingly established statistical departments, through which they keep themselves informed as to conditions both within and without their plants. These statistical offices are for the most part ready to further the extension of the registration area.

It will be helpful at this point to refer briefly to what some of the private companies have done to improve vital statistics. Their activities may point out the way in which other organizations can coöperate. The Association of Life Insurance Presidents, for example, has circularized the country in the cause of better registration. It has urged the model bill in many states, has been represented at legislative hearings in behalf of this measure, has held public sessions on the value of statistics, and has given wide publicity to these meetings. A number of individual companies have acted on their own initiative. The agency force of one organization regularly sends to the registrars notices of births occurring among policyholders. This company has distributed to physicians, to legislators, to

women's clubs, and to other groups whose coöperation might be helpful, thousands of pamphlets on the uses of vital statistics. It has advocated the Model Vital Statistics Bill in a number of states, and has asked its agency force and medical examiners to write to their representatives urging this advanced legislation. Still other organizations will be glad to serve in this campaign.

The movement for better vital statistics is suffering, however, from a lack of cohesion among its advocates. What is needed is a central office which will inspire and direct co-operation among the various public and private organizations. This central office should serve as a clearing house for all interested bodies. Its director should be well acquainted with the difficult problems which confront registrars in the states; he should, moreover, inspire confidence among statistical workers throughout the country. If necessary, this central office should be independent of government control, and privately endowed, like so many other philanthropies which have sprung up in recent years to fulfil some noteworthy public function. This is a matter of concern to the members of the American Statistical Association and of other organizations interested in the extension and improvement of the registration service.

Logically, this central office for registration propaganda should be within the Bureau of the Census itself. No other agency occupies so favorable a position both in its organization and in its traditions. The Bureau of the Census has in the past appreciated the importance of this aspect of its work. The former chief statistician of the division of Vital Statistics was a missionary to whose efforts much of the extension of the registration service is due. No one else has mastered the practical difficulties of the problem as he did. His coöperation was always at the disposal of the several states that needed him; his work bore fruit and gave early promise of a nationwide Registration Area. Today the Bureau occupies no such position of vantage in the movement. It is this which gives us such concern, and which, as I understand it, is the chief occasion for this symposium.

If the Bureau of the Census is to maintain its best traditions

as the organizer and as the repository of national vital statistics, it must satisfy a number of exacting conditions.

First: It should be ready to coöperate with state registration officials. Because of the constitutional limitations placed upon the federal service, the Bureau can obtain the fundamental data on mortality only through the courtesy of the states. It would do well, therefore, to endeavor to serve the states in the solution of their registration problems. To this end, the Bureau must have at its disposal a number of active and expert agents whose function shall be to act as consultants to state registrars, especially in the non-registration states. The cordial relations with the states must be maintained as a primary condition of effective service. At the same time there must be a harmonious plan for the transcription and forwarding from the states of the primary documents used by the federal service. The recent administrative ruling of the Director of the Census, reversing the former method of obtaining transcripts, very nearly resulted in the disruption of the Registration Area.


Second: The Bureau of the Census must be entirely non-partisan. Changes in national administration should not, as a matter of course, involve changes in directors, with the inevitable upheaval in policy and practice which these occasion in the Bureau. The work of this office is essentially scientific and technical in character. Experience should count as a chief consideration. The displacement of tried and efficient chiefs of division is, therefore, subversive of Bureau efficiency. Nor should political considerations be allowed to interfere with the accuracy of Census returns. Demands for padded population counts and for the publication of mortality rates in such a form as would make sanitary conditions appear better than they really are should receive no encouragement whatever from the Census Bureau. This office must always stand out as the exponent of truth, whatever the cost may be.

Third: The Bureau of the Census should encourage and guide public and private organizations in their statistical work. Industrial establishments and philanthropic institutions of all sorts are collecting vital statistics, the tabulation and the publication of which would prove of much greater value if they

were carried on in accordance with the standard practice of the Bureau. A well-directed effort toward this end would probably result in standardizing the compilations of the hospitals and sanatoria, the visiting nurse associations, and especially the life insurance companies. These last institutions—particularly the large industrial companies—possess a wealth of most useful data on mortality, which could readily be made to supplement the reports of the Bureau of the Census. Indeed, the record of their mortality experience in the non-registration states would prove to be the very best available measure of the sanitary conditions of these sections.

Fourth: The Bureau of the Census should become more active as an educational agency in the dissemination of statistical knowledge. Much of the material prepared by the Bureau, if properly analyzed and edited for the press, would prove of the greatest public interest. Such contributions would be especially helpful in furthering the movements for better hygiene and sanitation throughout the country. They would also result in increasing the amount of statistical instruction in our schools and colleges. This policy would leave a very definite impression upon the mental attitude of the people toward statistics, and the demand for better and wider registration would not be so easily denied or ignored by our States. In this way the foundation would be laid for nation-wide vital statistics.

In conclusion, let me say that the chief requirement at this time for the improvement and extension of our registration service is a better appreciation, by those who are directing the statistical work of the states and of the federal government, of the fact that they have in their hands the key to the solution of some of our most vexing problems.



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